

## **“The one who is coming into the world” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 9 May 2021 by Jordan Redding**

I.

Our gospel reading today is part of a larger narrative, describing the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The story begins with Jesus finding out that Lazarus is gravely ill -- indeed, Lazarus dies not long after. And it ends with Jesus calling Lazarus from the tomb after the body had been there four days. But as is typical with John, the stories are quite drawn out. A long time is spent building the suspense, retelling Jesus' coming. First he delays, then Lazarus' sister, Martha, meets him on the road as he arrives in Bethany. Then Jesus enters Bethany and meets with Lazarus' other sister, Mary -- and famously weeps. And only then does he go to the tomb to call Lazarus forth.

John is making a point, I think. The clue is in our reading today in Martha's confession of who Jesus is: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world." The life of faith is characterised by these words. By this middle space, this tension, which Martha is in, between the grief of a world captive to death, and the hope of resurrection to come. We know Lazarus will be raised. But we're not there yet.

We might see in Martha's actions something profound about our own experience of life now lived in faith. Our reading today begins with Martha hearing that Jesus is coming and so she hastens to meet him. She comes towards the one who is coming towards her. She hastens to the one who is already hastening towards her. And so there's this beautiful encounter between Jesus and Martha on the road, on the way - - an encounter made all the more pungent, all the more beautiful, because of the grief she bears and brings to Jesus.

We are like Martha, I think. Like her, we hear that Jesus is coming among us in the midst of whatever we endure, whatever we bear, our collective and individual grief. Indeed, we hear that Jesus is already among us, on the threshold, the one who is resurrection and life breaking in and disturbing things as they are. And she runs to meet him. What an image for prayer and for what we do when we gather in worship: we hasten towards the one who is already hastening towards us. We are bringing our lives before the one whose life is already breaking in.

It is a hallmark of the life of the church throughout history. Not only the conviction that the risen Jesus is indeed coming into the world now. But also the corresponding action. The response. The call to join with Martha in hastening towards God in word and action.

In every generation anew it is the same gospel that's proclaimed. The same risen Jesus who is coming to us by the Spirit. The same God, in whose life we share. And yet, every generation anew must discern what it means to faithfully respond to the coming life of God among us. Every generation anew must ask what it means to hasten towards the one who is hastening towards us.

## II.

161 years ago, almost to the day, Knox Church held its first services of worship. Not one, not two, but three services, just to kick off with a hiss and a roar. Rev. Donald Stuart, the first minister of Knox Church, preached in the afternoon on this passage from John.

It got me wondering, how he might have reflected on the passage and, perhaps more importantly, how the gathered congregation heard and interpreted it. How they sought to meet Jesus on the road and journey with him towards resurrection and life. How they, in their context, were captivated by the vision of God's eternal life with them. How they sought to point to and be faithful to God's presence among them in word and action.

I imagine the words of Martha to Jesus, "yes, Lord, I believe!", would have been heard with a sense of joyous affirmation and stirring optimism by the first congregation of Knox. The story of Knox's beginning bears witness to a liberal, generous, and ecumenical spirit. Knox was an amalgamation of two separate congregations and a whole range of denominational backgrounds. And in order to build the church building and manse and to afford a new minister and bring him and his family over from Scotland, the first congregation had to take on a sizable debt, which "they heartily resolved" to pay off at their first congregational meeting. Many generous benefactors committed at that meeting to paying off a large off that debt there and then. I'm not suggesting anything about our current financial woes! But I am pointing to this spirit of liberality and working together in pursuit of a shared goal, not only for what Knox could be. But for what this city could be. A vision of a liberal, godly, educated society, for the flourishing of all. And the church was at the centre of that vision, playing a central role forming people in service of the public good.

The church was not only at the centre of this vision. Knox was, in a sense, at the cutting edge. Literally at the margins, leading the way. Just as Bethany lay on the edge of Jerusalem, so too North Dunedin was once on the edge of the Dunedin township. At that stage, few people took the road north because it was unpaved and, in heavy rains, it would turn into a quagmire impassable without the proper boots.

And yet Knox was erected in the mud and the mire: a symbol of a growing city and the expectations and hopes people had for it. What it could be.

161 years later we see what it has become and indeed is still becoming. We see and enjoy the fruits of that vision. Knox has played a significant role in the life of this city over the years. Its civic life, certainly. The development of its social welfare system. But perhaps above all, its educational life, evident particularly in its relationship to the university. Donald Stuart was, of course, the first Vice-Chancellor at Otago. We celebrate the legacy of Knox: the original foresight, liberality, the ecumenical spirit of those who went before, which we continue to benefit from, both here at Knox but also in the wider city.

What might we take from this? While we do not want to overly romanticise or overstate the legacy of Knox, we can nonetheless celebrate and see in our history a people captivated by the hope of the risen Jesus. A people seeking, in good faith, to hasten towards him in word and action through the formation of flourishing society. And we give thanks.

### III.

But we also pause to ask how we might hear the passage differently today. The same passage. The same gospel. But what does it mean for us to hear that Jesus is coming now into our context? How do we point in faith to the one who is the resurrection and the life coming into the world?

I want to make three brief comments about how we might hear the passage differently to 161 years ago:

First, I am struck by Martha's first words to Jesus. Stuart didn't focus on these words at all. And in a way, given the sense of optimism, I'm not surprised. Even as Martha runs towards Jesus in faith, her first words are words of accusation, confusion, lament: *Lord, have if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* To be people who believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life does not mean we live with relentless positivity or unbridled optimism. In fact, precisely *because* we believe the risen Jesus is breaking into the world, the grief, the violence, the pain, the suffering, the chaos, the death is all the more scandalous. *Lord, if you been here sooner...* for God's sake! As a people of resurrection in a time of rapid church decline, in a time global pandemic, environmental collapse, I believe we are invited with Martha to lament.

Second, I am struck by Martha's limited grasp, her limited understanding. To Jesus' words, "your brother will rise again," she responds, "yes, I know he'll rise again on the *last* day." Like many Jews in her day, she believed in the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. But she hadn't yet come to grasp the significance of who Jesus

was... that in him, the resurrection is not just some future event after we die... it's disrupting things now. Her words are a reminder that, though the church seeks to be faithful to Jesus, our witness is always a fallen witness. Looking back at our own history, we will not only celebrate our past, but also critique the blindspots of those who went before, the failures, the shortcomings. We may notice, by their absence, the voices of the past who weren't heard, the voices who were silenced. We may identify where witness to the gospel became confused with other ideologies or vested interests. The church in New Zealand has blotted its copybook too often, which is partially responsible for a society that is now largely indifferent to its Christian heritage, if not downright hostile to it. We are living in a time of cultural amnesia, both in society and in the church. I find in Martha's words a reminder of the importance of prayer and careful theological thinking, entering into conversation with Christ by Spirit, repenting when we get it wrong, and allowing our resurrection imagination to be expanded through living encounter with the risen Jesus.

Third, it strikes me that precisely in her lamenting, precisely in her faltering witness, Martha is not alone. She is with Jesus on the way to resurrection and new life. She sets out in faith with him, trusting her fellow traveller, believing her brother will not be left in the tomb. Believing that death and decay is not the final word. Believing that this life has been earmarked for something more. That God is at work making things more than they are. Like Martha, in gathering around this table, we encounter the living Jesus *on the way*. We encounter Jesus, while bearing our grief and the grief of the world. We encounter Jesus as people who have failed to understand fully and, indeed, whose witness to Jesus is deeply broken. But we encounter Jesus nonetheless. The one who is hastening towards us. The one who weeps alongside us. The one who leads us to the tomb and cries into the abyss: "Lazarus! Come forth!" Amen.

## **KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN**

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**Knox Church**  
449 George Street  
Dunedin  
New Zealand  
Ph. (03) 477 0229  
[www.knoxchurch.net](http://www.knoxchurch.net)